

## Overcoming a wave of destruction

SAN ANTONIO, Texas — When Airman 1st Class Mark Torneskog went to bed each night he was in Thailand, he was dead tired. There was no time to relax and enjoy the country's fabled hospitality. But he was happy.

The air transportation troop began putting in 14-hour days loading and unloading transport aircraft at Utapao, which became the hub of the Christmas tsunami humanitarian relief airlift — from the moment he landed Jan. 3.

"We got off the plane and started working," he said. "This place is pretty busy."

The Airman from Andersen

by Master Sgt. Michael Farris

Air Force Base, Guam, was one of the more than 13,000 U.S. troops deployed to Southwest Asia to provide humanitarian relief after the Christmas tsunami.

Disaster struck Dec. 26, when a shift in the earth's tectonic plates 100 miles of the Indonesian coast set off the most powerful earthquake in 40 years. It caused a series of deadly tsunami waves that raced across the Indian Ocean. The killer waves first struck the Indonesian island of Sumatra, then Thailand. Then it battered Sri Lanka before devastating India and mauling Somalia. In total, 12 nations felt the affect.

When flood waters receded, the

devastation was unprecedented. At least 150,000 were dead, thousands were missing and millions lost their home, families and livelihood.

"It's beyond our comprehension to think about how many lives have been lost," President George Bush said. He said it will take victims a long time to rebuild their lives.

### Joint relief effort

The president sent in a Marine Corps expeditionary force to spearhead relief efforts. Marine helicopters were soon reaching the people most affected by the disaster. Then active duty, Guard and Reserve troops mobilized to help. They soon made up the largest U.S. military force in the region since the Vietnam War — Combined Support Force 536 — known as Operation Unified Assistance. The effort turned into the largest humanitarian relief effort since the Berlin Airlift.

The Air Force stood up the 374th Air Expeditionary Wing at Utapao to oversee 24-hour air operations. Its C-130 Hercules flew from throughout the stricken region, going into any airfield that could support them. From stateside bases, C-5 Galaxy, C-17 Globemaster IIIs and contract transports began ferrying in tons of supplies. The effort intensified as nations joined the effort, sending aircraft and people. And soon, pledges of aid funds topped the \$4 billion mark.

To troops on the ground, all that didn't matter. They were too busy doing their jobs.

A C-130 flight engineer from Yokota Air Base, Japan, Staff Sgt. Mark Parth flew missions from Malaysia. He said, "Doing things like this is the best part of the mission because we experience firsthand the impact of our actions."

The impact was immediate, said Col. Mark Schissler, deployed commander of the Utapao-based wing.

"The one thing we've done that matters is deliver aid that stops suffering and death," said the colonel, who commands Yokota's 374th Airlift Wing.

That was the support force's first goal during the crisis response phase.



**Airmen drive a Spanish Red Cross vehicle** off an MC-130H Combat Talon aircraft at Banda Aceh, Indonesia. Hundreds of doctors, nurses, non-governmental disaster aid specialists and related equipment have reached this area, the northern part of the island of Sumatra.



**Airmen guide an HH-60G Pave Hawk helicopter** up the ramp of a C-17 Globemaster III aircraft at Kadena Air Base, Japan. Once aboard, the aircrew from

McChord Air Force Base, Wash., flew the 33rd Rescue Squadron helicopter to Sri Lanka, where it would join the tsunami relief effort.

Then the wing — with Airmen from almost 100 units and 14 bases — set up an airlift and delivery system that was safe and reliable. It was a combined effort, with aircraft from sister services and other nations helping deliver much-needed food, water and medicine to the victims.

Each nation's effort was critical to the relief effort. But Colonel Schissler said the Air Force arrived with a "proven organization and a quick response, which very few" countries can do.

#### **Path to recovery**

Two weeks into the relief effort, operations switched from crisis response to the controlled recovery and reconstruction phase, the colonel said. The

Airmen's resolve didn't change.

"Morale is really good. People are excited to be helping — that's just the way we are," said Staff Sgt. Rod Hale, an air transportation troop from Travis Air Force Base, Calif. Working from Utapao, he's heard few complaints. "Everyone just wants to do their part."

The colonel said the U.S. troops are prepared to remain as long as needed. President Bush has said that might be a long time.

"We have a duty, we have made a commitment and our commitment is a long-term commitment, to help those good folks in the part of the world that got affected get back on their feet," the president said in a speech to officials of the Agency for International Development and other relief groups in

Washington, D.C.

The recovery will take years. But Airman Torneskog doesn't mind doing his part.

"Before, I always thought we were just pushing around cargo to move it from one place to another. Here I know what we're doing is for a good cause."

Seeing what he did make a difference made the Airman feel better about doing his job. He says that what he does has a purpose. And that makes him — and many others — feel good.

— by Louis A. Arana-Barradas with contributions by Capt. Carlos Diaz, Master Sgt. Chuck Roberts and Air Force Print News